

*by Rae Kussey 1970<sup>S</sup>*

We left Leonora early in August in a convoy of six vehicles led by Bob Collard. Two station wagons, one saloon, one utility and two campervans. Before leaving Kalgoorlie we had visited the Tourist mine, it is quite something to go down in a genuine miner's lift a couple of thousand feet underground and be shown all around by miners. We had spent the Sunday night at the Leonora Caravan Park and had our last showers for a week.

The road was excellent bitumen as far as Windarra, then we turned off on to a very good dirt road. Our next 2,000 K were to be on dirt roads, until we joined the Stuart Highway en route to Alice Springs. The country was surprisingly green, with plenty of health looking shrubs and scattered trees, but the most noticeable feature was the crystal roadside droppings from dead windscreens, and the abandoned shells of vehicles. One of Bob's many stories was about a member of a previous convoy who had plagued him with idle questions.

Q. What are all those cars we are passing?

A. They dropped out of previous convoys.

Q. What happened to the people?

A. We were in a hurry, so we buried them on the return trip.

The weather was good, blue skies with light cloud. The red earth and colorful outcrops with occasional low ranges made travelling very pleasant. We found a good camping spot each late afternoon and soon had a campfire going. Some used gas for cooking, others made small cooking fires. Toilet arrangements varied, most of the party just took to the spinifex. We carried our own water to last to Ayers Rock. Petrol was available at Warburton and Docker River but we all carried enough for at least 600 K. The temperature was around zero each morning, so we didn't really mind going showerless. We reached Warburton on Wednesday morning, refuelled and moved on, and found that we had seen the last of the good road. From there to the Stuart Highway it varied from not too bad to horrible, deep sand drifts, corrugations and rocky surfaces (similar to the Pinnacle road) but we had no mishaps. Yes, there was one, some natives managed to slide into Bob's rear door on a patch of heavy sand. Their vehicle would no doubt be joining the rest of the wayside shells before very long.

We rose at sunup each morning and were soon on our way. We had plenty of stops, Bob showed us rock paintings, plenty of gnamma holes, small animals in caves, historic spots, old survey pegs - he had stories to tell about everything, and did not make the mistake of mixing fact with fiction.

On Thursday we visited the Giles Met. Station (by arrangement, it is not open to tourists). This was fascination. I had expected all

the explanations to be beyond me. but the young man who showed us around explained it all in terms we could understand. We saw the balloon go up and away.

The country was changing, plenty of desert oaks and quite large ghost gums, and that afternoon we passed through the beautiful Schwerin Mural Crescent and Petermann Range country. At one river bed we dug for water (not from necessity) and found beautiful water just below the hot sand.

The Docker River Social Club was our next call and it really seemed quite a social visit. Well kept, completely native owned and built. They employ a married white couple but the man assured me that the natives did really own the place, no missions, no Government aid. It is just across the border of the Northern Territory.

Late on Friday afternoon we saw the Olgas in the sunset, and camped near there. A lovely collection of rounded domes, beautiful shapes. Next morning we walked and climbed as far as we could around them.

The tallest dome is higher than Ayers Rock, the geological formation is quite different. In fact we were all rather disappointed in "the Rock" when we finally reached it, it is certainly immense. However, by the time Bob had taken us around and explained various native legends we began to feel something of the spell it has obviously had for the natives for countless years. That night, Saturday, we had wonderful hot showers, bliss, and then to the Desert Sands Motel where we wine and dined in fine style and enjoyed talking to the other tourists there.

Ayers Rock was the parting of the ways of our party, we went on to Kings Canyon with Bob, others went direct to Alice Springs.

Kings Canyon is in a remote area, passing through the original Angus Downs property. Nice country, with plenty of large trees but looking dry in spite of the good season they had had. It is in the George Gill Range, and proved to be a difficult, long climb. Spectacular certainly, for those not (like me) a bit exhausted by the climb, or bewildered by trying to keep to a reasonable route. That evening we stayed at Wallara Ranch Roadhouse, where we found a marvellously cold swimming pool and equally welcome cold beer. Here we left Bob, and continued on a rough, lonely road until we joined the Stuart Highway, thence to Alice Springs.

"The Alice" is delightful. We stayed at the Heavitree Gap Caravan Park which started out as an orange grove (yes, you can pick the oranges). It has some very fine desert oaks, and other shade trees. A short walk took us to the Pitchi Richi Park Museum, a very well kept collection of historical Australiana in a park setting. From Alice Springs we went to all the nearby gorges, staying overnight at Glen Helen and Ormiston. At the Glen Helen Roadhouse

we talked to a young policeman, most interesting, and when he said he'd better go because he had someone in the vehicle, I said "Can't he come in?" policeman said "Better not, he's a murderer, I think". There had been trouble, and a killing, at a native settlement the night before.

We went up and down the various gorges, climbing rocks, wading through the shallows, and thoroughly enjoyed it all.

There is a wonderful painting in Alice Springs, called Panorama Guth (Guth is the artist). Impossible to describe the concept, but unthinkable to visit Alice Springs without seeing it.

The Todd River was still running, rather disconcertingly for the Henley-on-Todd organisers, the event was the weekend after we left. We had about a week there, then off and up the Stuart Highway to the Devil's Marbles where we stayed overnight. (Well off the road). This collection is similar to the Olgas but much smaller.

On to Mataranka - this is in the Elsey Station area (Mrs Gunn's "We of the Never Never") but Mrs Gunn said nothing about the hot spring. It is in a beautiful setting of native trees and palms, the water stays a constant 72F and is crystal clear. The day was cool enough to appreciate the warm water, though when we passed through again ten days later the 72F was much too warm and we quickly sought the coolth of a pool further down, away from the source of heat.

At Tennant Creek we saw the gold being loaded on to a van, the bank manager nearby, and a casually dressed lad with a gun being the only indication that it was not an ordinary delivery van.

At Katherine we were fortunate in arriving just in time for the afternoon boat run up the gorge. We stayed in the Caravan Park at the Gorge, it is a green and pleasant park. The Northern Territory Tourist Development are doing a good job in promoting tourism, though there is still a lot to be done. They have developed the Berry Springs into a garden area for daytime use, and the Howard Springs closer to Darwin caters for Caravans. Douglas Springs is not developed, we found it quite delightful, a very hot stream joins a very cold one, and at the junction we found family parties lazing in whatever degree of warmth they preferred. The campers took a pride in keeping the area beautifully clean, even though they were obviously sharing it with the wild buffaloes in the area, we saw several beauties.

Darwin we found very hot and dusty, the town shows little sign of the cyclone, fine buildings and excellent roads everywhere, but further out there were plenty of wrecked housing settlements.

We soon left, and headed back to Kununurra. There is some magnificent scenery along the way, especially in the Victoria River



area, and in between the stations where years of uncontrolled overstocking has denuded the country.

Kununurra looked very civilised. We stayed in the Caravan Park on the edge of the lake - the early morning, and evening colors, and the birdlife were a joy. We visited the main dam, Lake Argyle which is a huge extent of blue-blue water in the strong sunlight, with its steep red, or grey-green, slopes down to the myriad islands and little bays. We enjoyed a swim in the Village pool. The return to Katherine seemed longer than the 650K as we were 2½ hours behind the clock, but we didn't mind when we arrived at the Low Level for a swim in the Katherine. This is a very popular picnic place, being clear and shallow but still lively water. At the Three Ways Roadhouse we left the Stuart Highway and turned east on the Barklay Highway to Mount Isa. The country varied a lot, at first quite heavily wooded with plenty of wildflowers and flowering shrubs, but that station areas rather barren. As we got into Queensland there were longer stretches of high and dry spinifex with plenty of evidence of past fires. And disastrous fires have since ravaged the area from Julia Creek and Richmond up to the Gulf.

It was getting really hot now (early September) with pleasantly cool nights. Mount Isa is a young city with a young and rapidly increasing population. The city looks after its tourists, with buses and guides provided daily. We found it quite fascinating and would have liked to stay longer than the few days we could spare. We visited Mary Kathleen, a Company town that has had more than its share of troubles. It is still the prettiest little town you could ever wish to see. Built around a park full of good shade trees and seats and lawns, ablaze with bauhinias and bougainvilleas and hibiscus. The people we talked to were understandably worried, but certainly not pessimistic about the future.

We continued on the Flinders Highway to Chartres Towers and then detoured around by another Company town with a "Private, Keep Out" sign. The road had become narrow, the erosion gullies looked awful, and the cattle were pathetically thin. The locals said then fatten up when the rain starts. Or drown. We were now approaching the Atherton Tableland, most beautiful country with rain forests, cultivated areas with rich volcanic soil, rivers and waterfalls, hot springs, flowering trees, and around every second bend a fairylike distant view across the mountains. We stayed in a Caravan Park in among tall trees in Atherton, and from there went up and down the winding Rex Highway to Mossman on

the east coast. This is a sugar town, and there can be few more lovely sights than to look down on the sugarcane fields, some green, some ripening, and at sunset, a few being fired. The smoke has a distinct sweet smell. And the homes of the growers all seemed large, modern and well built, very different from the rather untidy rambling type we usually associate with rural properties. From Mossman we went gradually down the Queensland coast with its picture-postcard ocean and mountain views, up on the tourist train to the Barron Falls area, back to the Atherton Tableland, back to the coast, launch trips to the various islands both coral and volcanic, swimming and sunbathing and enjoying the luscious tropical fruit picked-as-ripened, quite different from the cold-store variety. The roads are quite good, narrow in places, broken edges at times, with flood markings in metres at every dip it seemed, but bitumen. There is a great deal of bridge-building and roadmaking in progress. Caravan Parks were plentiful and good, most coastal towns have choice riverbank sites for Council run caravan parks. So on, down through the Sunshine Coast, by-passing Brisbane (not actually, but we went through like an old Bondi tram) and out to the Gold Coast where we stayed a while visiting friends etc. It was starting to get cool again, and when we passed into New South Wales the scenery was beautifully soft-green-rural, wide rivers, lush grasses, lovely coastline, but no more swimming. And there can be no more beautiful drive than the old road (not the new toll road) from Gosford to Sydney. From there we were visiting friends and relations. There was heavy rain, and flooding which we avoided. Sunshine again on the Murray River where we picked mushrooms and got involved in shearing. Melbourne was in its glorious spring-colour, suburban gardens ablaze with roses, roses. We went to Port Augusta via the Murray River, then across to the Barossa Valley where we enjoyed sampling and stocking up the various delights of the vineyards. The valley had a large German population and is now quite a mixture, but there is quite a northern European atmosphere. Perhaps it was the soft rain, wrapping the valley in mist with patches of sunshine. Hans Andersen picture country. Westward then and across on the new Eyre Highway, stopping at the "camera stops" to go down to the ocean, the terrible, beautiful cliffs with the sea hundreds of feet below. It is no longer a Nullabor, trees, shrubs, grasses, all green and many in flower. And of course some hard red earth between, just to remind us. It was only as we approached Southern Cross that we suddenly found withered, stunted crops and all the heartbreak signs of the drought, and even that soon gave way to more normal crops. And so, home and happy after a lovely trip around Australia.